

EVALUATING ILLUSTRATIONS IN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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Illustrating a book for children is a demanding task but evaluating illustrations in a children's book needs a special understanding on the part of the evaluator.

There is a great variety in the books for children. On one hand there are text books and on the other hand are books designed for a child's enjoyment, which again are spread over fiction, non fiction, concept books, activity and hobby books, etc.

Books prepared for children's enjoyment have a wide range and cater to different age groups. There are books for the pre-schooler who can only look and listen, and books for children in older age groups. The requirements of books for different age groups also differ widely on account of their different levels of comprehension.

The purpose of an illustration in a 'look and listen' picture book is to capture the young reader's attention, giving him a pleasant and memorable experience. A successful illustration is that which speaks the language of a child, which a child can understand by himself. It also clearly brings home the message that the author and the illustrator wish to convey. A good illustration leaves a deep impression on a child's mind and the child viewer wishes to see it again and again. A good illustration is like a vehicle which carries the viewer to another world and helps him to weave

his own make-believe world which lingers on in a child's mind, often even when the child becomes an adult. Children in different age groups have different perceptions and since they like to relate with the characters in the text, the illustrations have to be within the realm of their comprehension.

Let us consider the illustrations in the picture books which are meant only for a child's enjoyment. The starting point of a picture book is the author's idea which comes in the form of text. The illustrator follows the idea or text by complementing it with illustrations. One might say that the illustrator fills up the blanks in the text through illustrations and provides details which a child may not have otherwise understood. Thus in the making of a picture book, there is a contribution of two creative minds, but in its totality it is a wholesome product, larger than the individual contributions of the author and the illustrator. If the author is also an illustrator which often happens, he has greater freedom in the use of his pen and the brush.

Commonly, an evaluation is a necessary exercise before a picture book is accepted for publication. Not only should the illustration complement the text, it must be oriented to the kind of text - fiction, fantasy, concept or non fiction. The work of an illustrator puts immense responsibility on the evaluator. For he is the final arbiter to pronounce whether the labour of the artist merits further attention. He has to make a judgement whether the illustrator has fulfilled the requirements of a picture book. To evaluate or to judge illustrations in a picture book, the evaluator has to develop a child's eye to get a child's perception. He has also to acquaint himself with picture books in plenty, both good and not so good, to develop an instinct to select the good ones.

Besides, the evaluator has to acquaint himself with the comprehension level of different age

groups of children. For example, the world of a very young child is limited to objects which are familiar to him. An abstract illustration will not interest him. On the other hand, the details and illusion of depth are more prominent in picture books for older children. Therefore the illustrator has to have a special knack for understanding children and the capability to draw according to the level of their comprehension.

A good and accurate drawing is basic to a good illustration. The style and creativity in the art work can only embellish a good drawing and add to the charm of the picture book. It is through his drawing that the artist shapes and conveys the visual content of the story. The drawing is the foundation on which other aspects of the picture's mood or colour rest. Artists who draw exclusively on their own imagination without maintaining the accuracy of basic drawings end up with vague and unattractive illustrations. A good illustration has to have accuracy and liveliness. One of the qualities of a lively figure is showing movement. It is very often that in illustrating picture books, the artist needs to draw figures or animals or living creatures in motion so that the characters can be seen to be doing something. In drawing a picture, the illustrator infuses it with life. He has to look for a moment when the picture begins to speak out. Stillness in an illustration is deadly and it hardly leaves any impact on a viewer's mind. For example, the calendar type of still illustrations with cute figures, painted in strong colours have no place in children's picture books.

Quite often, evaluation of art work in a picture book poses another problem. When the original illustrations are displayed without the accompanying text (which actually is the base of the respective illustration) proper evaluation is not possible. Since the text and illustrations go together to make a picture book complete, the evaluation of picture book illustrations should be

done on the totality of the product. A single illustration from some picture book is merely a segment of a larger object. The story in a picture book consists of many sequences which unfold events from beginning to end. Therefore, one single picture can give a feel of only one event and viewing a single illustration presents only a partial view of the contribution of the illustrator. If the evaluator has to do justice, he should see the text along with the sequence of the pictures. Picking up situations in the text together with the illustrations complementing it can only give a correct idea about the endeavour of the artist and how successful he has been.

There is also a separate category of wordless picture books. This is wholly a visual media which has its own language. These picture books need special handling by the illustrator to stir the young viewer's imagination and enable him to make his own story based on the visual images. This is often difficult for the young child to understand by himself. Even an adult helping the child would need to imagine a story to make it interesting for the child. The wordless picture books have not generated sufficient interest among children's book creators.

In the end, I would say that there are innumerable styles and ways to illustrate for children but the best illustrations are those which can communicate directly with the child. A really good illustration speaks and sings in a child's language. A child may not remember the artist but he will certainly remember the emotion of the illustration. No style is either good or bad. It is the power of the illustration that matters, depending on how much it communicates and is understandable to a child. Whether realistic or stylised, the child must enjoy it.

The evaluator's job is to select art work that has a childhood appeal. Then alone would the picture book fulfil the promise of providing pleasure and enjoyment to children.